

# CONNECT

Spring/Summer 2022



## SPARKING CREATIVITY

Loan client Metal Trade Solutions is shaping a new future for manufacturing.

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Pictured: Tobias Flood and Mark Eiden on the shop floor at their business, Metal Trade Solutions LLC in Winsted.

Photo by Kaitlyn Ortloff Photography



SOUTHWEST INITIATIVE  
FOUNDATION

# LESSONS ENTREPRENEURS CAN TEACH US IN TOUGH TIMES

**President/CEO Diana Anderson**



One of my favorite things about traveling around the region is stopping to visit the shops and businesses that make each community unique. While each entrepreneur is chasing the same dream of owning their own business, the businesses are all so different. From a manufacturing shop floor to the dining room of a supper club, I've enjoyed seeing how the dream of one person can energize so many more. And I always seem to find the perfect gifts for friends and family while browsing at local boutiques!

By nature, you have to have a good amount of optimism to be an entrepreneur, so it makes sense that we saw an increase in interest from people wanting to open a business over the last two years in our region. In fact, business startups have increased significantly statewide. Minnesotans started 42 percent more businesses last year than in 2019, according to DEED Commissioner Steve Grove.

An entrepreneurial spirit is one of our region's greatest assets. It's been developed for generations, grown through our history of agriculture and innovation, and taken off to impact practically every industry while providing a global reach. I anticipate this creative energy will only get stronger, especially as we see many new immigrants make their home in southwest Minnesota, bringing new ideas to the marketplace. Fostering an entrepreneurial spirit is good for our communities, whether you run your own

business or not. Business leaders are a key part of creating the type of community we all want to live in.

This issue, we're spotlighting southwest Minnesotans who have launched something new. Even if you've never taken the leap to start your own business, the lessons of entrepreneurship offer something for each of us as we continue to navigate challenges we didn't see coming and figure out how to thrive together. These are some of the same values that guide our work at the foundation.

First, stay curious. Remain open and responsive to opportunities in your community. They may spark something remarkable. Find the right balance of using experience and experimentation as you approach problem solving and ideas.

Second, look for ways to collaborate. I believe better results come from working together. Even though we bring different ideas to the



*Elevate Community Business Academy provides hands-on training in business planning and management tailored to underserved entrepreneurs. Kandiyohi County & City of Willmar Economic Development Commission is offering the Elevate course at no cost to entrepreneurs in Kandiyohi County with funding from Southwest Initiative Foundation. The first class of Elevate graduates includes (pictured, from left): Stephanie Thompson, Abdiweli Yusuf, Abdilahi Omar, Abdiqani Mahamed and Hteh Rue.*

*Photo submitted by Kandiyohi County & City of Willmar Economic Development Commission*

table, there's room for each person's gifts as we work toward our goal.

Third, be optimistic! Keep aspiring to achieve great things. When faced with questions or challenges, I find a good place to start is by identifying what works, and to build from that. What motivates you? Take time to identify people or ideas that you can go back to when you need inspiration or encouragement.

Our investment in small business owners is part of the cradle to career approach of Grow Our Own and the work to make sure our kids and families have what they need to succeed. More than that, it's an investment in people. Each person's success translates into success for their families and their communities as we work toward a southwest Minnesota where all people thrive.



## A message from our board chair

**Patricia Dols**

Diana Anderson has informed the board she plans to retire by June 30, 2023. She has served Southwest Initiative Foundation for 21 years, including the last seven as president/CEO. The board is grateful for Diana's thoughtful, inclusive, and bold leadership, and we are supportive of her decision to prioritize her family. It is a testament to Grow Our Own!

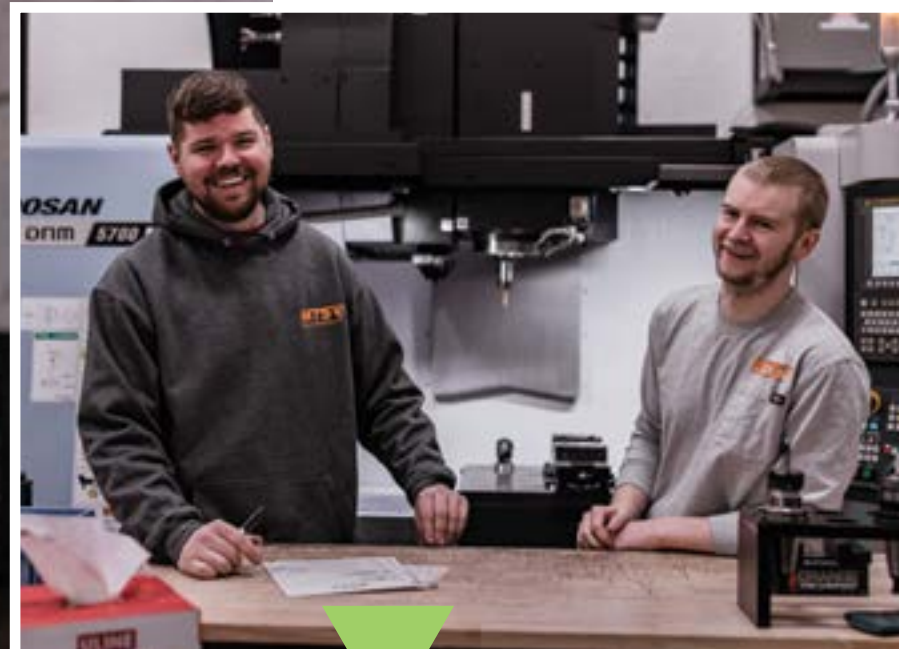
Our board and staff remain committed to our vision, mission, and values. The board is beginning a search process, which will be transparent and collaborative, and build on the incredible strength of this foundation. We are excited for the future of southwest Minnesota and will select the next Southwest Initiative Foundation leader to help shape it.

Watch for messages from the foundation to stay informed of the search and opportunities to celebrate Diana's leadership.



# Sparkling **creativity** in manufacturing

*Millennial entrepreneurs Mark Eiden and Tobias Flood want to shape the future of manufacturing by sparking creativity.*



In 2017, they founded Metal Trade Solutions LLC, a metalworking job shop in Winsted that offers metal fabrication, machine tool and design services. Southwest Initiative Foundation's Microenterprise Loan Program helped them get started with a loan to purchase their first machine – a CNC plasma cutter. Five years later, the business is growing and sparks are flying.

When they met at St. Cloud Technical & Community College, Mark and Tobias were in their first year of the Machine Tool Technology Program. Motivated to learn how to build things using metals, Tobias had spent hours at the machine shop at Dassel-Cokato High School as a student there. Mark grew up on a dairy farm and started repairing and welding things around the farm at a young age. The two discovered they had more in common: They didn't want to become traditional machinists.

"The work environment in a lot of the industry is, 'We do things this way because this is how we've always done things,'" Tobias said. **"Mark and I just wanted that creativity back, to do things the way we wanted, embrace these new ideas and methods of production."**

After earning their degrees in machine tool technology, Tobias and Mark took a year of business classes to prepare for opening their own shop. They entered the workforce directly out of school, spending nights and weekends renovating space in a former creamery building that would become the future home of Metal Trade Solutions.

"The drive for me to go on our own was just bringing in our own views about new things. You can take a raw piece of material and make

**Hear Mark and Tobias tell their business story on the "Lost and Found" podcast, Episode 5.**

Visit [bit.ly/MTS-podcast](https://bit.ly/MTS-podcast)

"Lost and Found" is hosted by Betsy Bonnema. She is the creator and facilitator of Startup, which helps entrepreneurs including SWIF loan clients develop their company brand, goals, growth strategies and vision for the future.

ABOVE LEFT: Mark Eiden grew up on a dairy farm and started repairing and welding things around the farm at a young age. He's fascinated by turning raw materials into something new.

ABOVE RIGHT: When they met at St. Cloud Technical & Community College, Mark Eiden and Tobias Flood were in their first year of the Machine Tool Technology Program. Now they run their own business together – Metal Trade Solutions in Winsted.

Photos by Kaitlyn Ortloff Photography

anything out of it if you're creative, if you know the processes," Mark said. "I always think it's really cool that it could be anything."

In addition to financing, SWIF staff provide free technical assistance resources to microloan clients to improve their business management skills. Areas of support include business planning and financial analysis, QuickBooks training, marketing assistance and other training opportunities for the life of the loan.

"Mark and Tobias have taken full advantage of the technical assistance we offer. They are innovative and recognize opportunities to grow, and it's helped them navigate the first years of their business, which can be some of the most challenging," said Jackie Turner, SWIF Economic Development Officer.

"Southwest Initiative Foundation has been a huge help since we started. They provided help to give us direction," Mark said.

Metal Trade Solutions made its first dollar in 2017, and in 2019 Mark and Tobias were both able to work full-time at the business. Since last year, they've added their first three employees and are looking to fill more roles. Part of their vision is to promote careers in manufacturing. The Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development projects 86,500 job openings across the industry by 2028 as older workers retire.

"I think in 20 years, if I'm able to walk into the business and see that we inspired a whole bunch of young people in our company to learn manufacturing and learn something new, that's success to me. And they're happy coming to work," Mark said.

*The Southwest Initiative Foundation Microenterprise Loan Program receives funding assistance from the U.S. Small Business Administration and U.S. Department of Agriculture.*



# Mining for joy at Rock Ranch

Marie LaRock was born and raised on a farm near Hills in Rock County; her grandfather, a horseman, instilled in Marie a love for horses early on. “Growing up in southwest Minnesota was a treasure, really. The people, communities, and environment are just different,” Marie said.

As a speech language pathologist in various school systems across southwest Minnesota, Marie often dreamt about how she could help kids and families while sharing her love for horses. Her calling became louder as her own children got older. Her husband, Dan, felt the power of Marie’s calling and encouraged her to pursue her dreams. Together they opened the nonprofit Rock Ranch in 2016 on that same farm where Marie learned to ride.

Providing a joyful, safe, inclusive space for kids, families and seniors is a priority at Rock Ranch. The ranch provides horsemanship training, riding lessons, senior programming, and mental health counseling in a natural, faith-filled setting. Its programs encourage physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual growth – all which Dan and Marie believe are necessary for an individual to thrive. Dan and Marie were intentional about reaching those who could benefit from equine assisted therapy. “It’s okay to not be okay, and to be a place to support that is important to us,” Dan said. “Every day, we’re mining for joy. We choose to be joyful, and Rock Ranch is here to help spread that message.”

Thriving individuals means healthier families and communities and a stronger region.

**“Southwest Minnesota is full of communities who truly understand how to support one another. When you fall, there are many hands reaching to pull you up. There’s no better place to live,” Dan said.**

This year, Dan and Marie are celebrating the five-year anniversary of Rock Ranch, which has grown tremendously. Not only does the ranch have many loyal volunteers, but it also employs five part-time mental health professionals, a barn manager and an office and operations manager. In 2020, Marie had the opportunity of a lifetime to build an indoor arena in response to the waiting lists of people who wanted to come and experience Rock Ranch.

The LaRocks care deeply about the impact Rock Ranch has had and will continue to have on southwest

Minnesota. That’s why they established the Rock Ranch Joy of Horsemanship Endowment Fund at Southwest Initiative Foundation. SWIF helped the LaRocks create this named, charitable fund that is permanently endowed to ensure that the ranch can continue to serve kids, families and seniors well into the future.

Dan and Marie are also committed to supporting the broader mission of Southwest Initiative Foundation with their annual Growing Home Circle gift. Dan commented, “SWIF supports people who need it and is also an economic engine. SWIF strives to pour good in the southwest part of the state and serves that need to stimulate growth.”



**Interested in creating a fund to support a cause you care about? Tell us your idea and goals, and we’ll find the right match for you. Contact us at 800-594-9480 or [donate@swifoundation.org](mailto:donate@swifoundation.org).**



Marie and Dan LaRock are the founders of Rock Ranch.

Photo submitted by Rock Ranch

## A NEW NEED AND NEW Growing Home Circle

In 2004, Southwest Initiative Foundation leaders and supporters recognized the importance of building for the future through the launch of the Growing Home Circle, which helped grow our permanent endowment fund through gifts of \$1,000 or more.

Today, we recognize opportunity again and have redesigned the Growing Home Circle to reflect a changing time and a new need. This new need is for current program and operational dollars that ensure we live up to our mission with courage and with heart.

Now, the Growing Home Circle will acknowledge annual gifts of \$1,500 or more – with \$1,000 supporting our endowment fund and the remainder used immediately for our mission.

By elevating and expanding annual Growing Home Circle gifts, we continue to honor endowment fund growth, while generating dollars that breathe life into our mission-driven work right away.

**Give at the Growing Home Circle level through monthly giving.**

**Support the future of southwest Minnesota with a monthly gift of \$125. Visit [swifoundation.org/growing-home-circle](http://swifoundation.org/growing-home-circle) and then choose “Give Today.”**

Rock Ranch provides a joyful, safe, inclusive space for kids like these two young riders, as well as families and seniors. Photo submitted by Rock Ranch





# WHAT A DIFFERENCE TWO YEARS MAKES

Seven social entrepreneurs recently graduated from the 2020-2021 Initiators Fellowship in Greater Minnesota. They spent the last two years working on bold ideas to solve big challenges in their communities. Each fellow was supported by an executive mentor, \$60,000 in financial resources and a rich ecosystem of regional leaders to help them grow and flourish. Meet the two Initiators Fellowship alums from our region and read about their experiences in their own words.



## BACKING NATIVE ARTISTS

Photo by Paul Middlestaedt

**Anne O'Keefe-Jackson** is a member of the Caŋša'yapi Oyate (Lower Sioux Indian Community), an artist, an entrepreneur and a human resources professional. Her fellowship focused on building a Native arts supply business, Mni Sota Arts.

*I was born in Minneapolis and make my home on the Lower Sioux Indian Reservation in Morton. This is the community my ancestors are from. All members of my immediate family have moved back to the reservation over the years. I have a hard time imagining working or living anywhere else. It's very much a sense of community.*

*My goal with the Initiators Fellowship was to increase the availability of traditional art supplies for Native artists. In our community, we don't have a lot of area artists. It's just emerging here. I'm really trying to bring voice to those people and recognition for them. There's a huge desire for this in our communities, to support artists, to create. But access is sometimes difficult. I'm trying to support artists who want to do work and help them understand this is important work they're doing.*

*I would also like to have a space to exhibit artwork and to have Native artists come and perform. I have always wanted a gathering place with beautiful artwork and supplies for sale, a place where community members could gather, connect and build relationships.*



## SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS AND SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

Social entrepreneurs have identified a social or environmental issue about which they're passionate and bake that social mission into the heart of their business.

Social enterprises are organizations that address a basic unmet need or solve a social or environmental problem through a market-driven approach.

*Working with Southwest Initiative Foundation, it's a relationship like no other. I've never had an experience where people are just like, "How can I support you?" Especially with the Initiators Fellowship, that's been lifechanging - the connections and networking and just the opportunity it's created.*

*The foundation has just been amazing. Scott, Diana, Pablo - they're not just, "This is what I do for work." They're really invested in the communities they're working with, and you can tell. It's been an ongoing relationship of not only what can I do for you, but, "Can you help with Welcoming Week? Do you want to reach out to this woman about the needs of and having daycare in your community?" It's also about building connections here. It's not just a money thing. It's*

The Initiators Fellows and their mentors gathered for a February 2020 convening.

Photo submitted by the Initiative Foundation.

*building a real foundation. They show up. They support you. It's a support network.*

As part of the fellowship, Anne worked with mentors Mary V. Bordeaux and Peter J. Strong of Racing Magpie, a Lakota-centric arts and culture organization in South Dakota. They gave Anne critical support in clarifying and expanding her vision.

In addition to the fellowship, Anne collaborates with Southwest Initiative Foundation on several projects. In her role as Human Resources Director at Jackpot Junction Casino Hotel, Anne is a partner in our new Southwest Initiative Employer Resource Network® (ERN), an innovative approach to workforce development. She has also served as a local coordinator as part of region-wide Welcoming Week activities in southwest Minnesota.

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## CLOSING THE JUSTICE GAP

Photo by Paul Middlestaedt

**Erin Schutte Wadzinski** is an attorney in her hometown of Worthington. Her social enterprise is Kivu Immigration Law, a law firm focused on closing the justice gap in Greater Minnesota.

*Prior to receiving the fellowship, I had returned home to Worthington after 10 formative years on the East Coast to accept a position as an attorney at the Immigrant Law Center of Minnesota (ILCM). At ILCM, I received all sorts of calls from local residents with questions and requests for assistance. But due to funding limitations and staff capacity, ILCM was not able to meet all the immigration-related needs of the community. I wanted to provide legal services that were not available through existing resources.*

*My time spent working in the field of immigration law in Worthington was absolutely crucial in my ability to launch my own practice in Worthington. Among other valuable experiences I had with ILCM, I gained an understanding of the legal landscape in southwest Minnesota and what kinds of resources were not readily available but were in demand among immigrants and refugees.*

*Kivu Immigration Law serves refugees and asylees, unaccompanied minors, permanent residents, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients, victims of crimes, and family members of U.S. citizens – all of whom have immigration needs that we can meet. Kivu Law helps lawful permanent residents with the naturalization application process so that green card holders can become U.S. citizens. We guide people in exploring options for employment based visas to help meet hiring needs and provide employment authorization to our region's workforce. We support victims of domestic violence, trafficking, and other serious crimes in seeking immigration benefits.*

*While I honestly never expected I would return home permanently, I had never stopped calling Worthington home. This sense of belonging, which is perhaps also a very privileged position of garnering community trust and support, served as a platform to get involved in the community.*

*It was the financial support that really lured me in to applying for the Initiators Fellowship. However, I realized that it's really the networks, the mentorship and the encouragement from the fellowship that has been the most invaluable to me. The fellowship focuses on you as a person as much as your business idea.*

*I'm so grateful to Southwest Initiative Foundation and other fellowship partners to be able to be*

*part of this esteemed network of entrepreneurs, philanthropists and changemakers. The Initiators Fellowship gave me the extra boost I needed to launch my social enterprise. It has been more successful than I could have imagined.*

Since launching Kivu Immigration Law two years ago, Erin has provided legal consultation to 500 immigrants, and she currently employs five people. In February, Kivu Immigration Law purchased an office building in downtown Worthington with help from Southwest Initiative Foundation's Business Finance Loan Program. The building is larger than Kivu's rented office and will provide space to continue growing the team. Erin has also been a partner with SWIF in hosting Lead For Minnesota Fellow Ricky Mojekwu and leading Welcoming Week activities in Worthington.



## NEW COHORT OF FELLOWS

*From a community journalist with a goal to surface community-centered challenges and solutions to an entrepreneur creating felon-friendly employment to a grocery store owner creating food access, the field of eight fellows for the 2022-2023 Initiators Fellowship cohort has been selected.*

*The fellows from southwest Minnesota are Khalif Ahmed Bashir of Willmar and Kristine Shelstad of Madison. Learn about their social ventures by visiting [bit.ly/InitiatorsFellows2022](https://bit.ly/InitiatorsFellows2022).*

## ABOUT THE INITIATORS FELLOWSHIP

Congratulations to the entire cohort of 2020-2021 Initiators Fellows! Fellows from our neighboring regions include Alise Sjostrom, Hamdia Mohamed and Mark Van Herr of Stearns County; Jon Friesner of Crow Wing County; and Rachel Stone of Clay County.

The Initiators Fellowship is a program of the Little Falls-based Initiative Foundation to help aspiring social entrepreneurs fast-track their ideas, grow their social and professional networks and further develop their business and community leadership skills. Partners include Northwest Minnesota Foundation, Southwest Initiative Foundation and West Central Initiative.

Granite Partners, a mission-driven private investment and holding company based in St. Cloud, worked in concert with the Initiative Foundation to develop the Initiators Fellowship program and provides critical funding. The Bush Foundation and Sourcewell have also made a financial commitment to support the fellows on their business-building journey.





**SOUTHWEST INITIATIVE  
FOUNDATION**

15 3rd Avenue NW  
Hutchinson, MN 55350



## HELP FOR HELPERS

Whether you're a child care provider, teacher, health care worker, have an important place on an assembly line, or are another type of essential worker or service provider, we have unique resources to offer you some relief, to help release your spirit and increase your capacity to take on the world. Visit [swifoundation.org/helpforhelpers](http://swifoundation.org/helpforhelpers) to build your knowledge and practice of self-care and to nourish your passion.

This special site was created to fit the needs of the people of southwest Minnesota, in partnership with Samantha Louise Leadership Cultivation, Atwater, Minn.

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